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SIPDIS

FOR DRL (MMITTELHAUSER) AND NEA/MAG (MHAYES, JPATTERSON,  
SWILIAMS)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: STUDENT UNION UNDER PRESSURE AS STUDENTS ENTER  
53TH DAY OF HUNGER STRIKE

REF: 08 TUNIS 39

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Since February 9, several students have engaged in a prolonged hunger strike in front of the national headquarters of the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET) in Tunis. They are protesting their expulsion from their universities claiming the expulsions were politically motivated because they are UGET activists. They intend to continue striking until they are reinstated. Police have prevented some supporters from visiting the strikers and in reaction a group of 158 Tunisians and others used Facebook to organize a one-day hunger strike March 26 to show their support. The Secretary General of UGET Ezzeddine Zaatour complained to PolOff that university disciplinary boards were expelling student activists under political pressure. He and the UGET have come under increasing political pressure over the past year because of his continued push for permission to hold the union's 25th national congress. After three years of discussions, and several postponements, the Ministry of Higher Education finally granted UGET permission in late February to hold its national congress April 10-11. The UGET, like so many Tunisian NGOs, is divided Qhin and under pressure from without effectively paralyzing the organization. End Summary.

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Students on Strike  
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¶2. (C) The five students mounting the hunger strike were accused of various actions, including lack of respect for civil authorities, and disorderly behavior, none of which were directly linked to their union activities, and expelled by their universities in 2007 and 2008. After their expulsions they were additionally sentenced to prison for periods ranging from 6-18 months. The students range in age from 23-26, two each were in their first, second, and third years of university and they were studying business management, law, science and journalism. Two of the strikers were taken to the hospital for treatment and then continued the strike. UGET Secretary General Zaatour expressed concern for their long-term health and said he and others have tried to convince them to stop their strike. A sixth student joined the hunger strikers after having been just released from prison. He was expelled from university in 2004 for holding an unauthorized meeting and since then has faced several trials and imprisonment.

¶3. (C) The students claim the Ministry of Higher Education has not fulfilled its promises to help them return to

university after serving their prison sentences. The Ministry has upheld the expulsions as legitimate and said it will not respond to the students' demands. Zaatour said the Ministry had told him it would not take any action until the students end the hunger strike. According to Zaatour, most of the politically active NGOs have voiced support for the students, including the independent opposition parties, the Union of Democratic Women, the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the Union of University Teachers. The national union umbrella organization (UGTT) has not spoken out for the students. Police have been observing the hunger strikers and have prevented some people from visiting them. In a sign of how Tunisians are circumventing this type of GOT action, a group of 158 Tunisians and others used Facebook to organize and publicize a one-day hunger strike March 26 in solidarity with the students.

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Divided Within and Under Pressure from Without  
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¶4. (C) In a now well worn path, the regime has been undermining the UGET from both within and without for at least a year. The GOT firmly controls university campuses and denies most organizations, including Embassies, access. The UGET has been the recognized student union since the ¶1952. However, GOT opposition to the union has been steadily growing and became more pronounced the end of 2008 as Zaatour continued to insist on trying to organize the union's 25th national congress, which the Ministry of Higher Education had delayed several times. February 26 Zaatour announced that, after three years of discussions, the Ministry had finally given its approval for the national congress to be held April 10-12 in Bizerte.

¶5. (C) Most observers conclude that the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party has been trying to replace the UGET with an RCD-controlled student union. It has employed a variety of tactics from direct intimidation to using university administration contacts to control the timing of elections for student positions. Zaatour called on students to boycott elections for members of university scientific councils in December 2008 after the RCD arranged for the elections to be held for four hours only, two days before the winter break, when most students were focused on tests or had already left campus. Zaatour told PolOff that government harassment of UGET members is a continual problem making it difficult for him to even stay in contact with UGET organizers in other towns. He said seven or eight UGET activists are in prison for periods ranging from five months to four years. The government reduced its funding for the union in 2008 and has not provided any funding for 2009.

¶6. (C) Zaatour discovered in February that he had been tried in absentia and sentenced to six months in prison for insulting behavior towards a civil servant on duty stemming from an altercation with a policeman in 2004. He had ten days to appeal the verdict and the court had to reschedule a new trial in which he had to be present. The new trial took place March 25 and a verdict is expected soon. Several other UGET activists were accused of violent aggression against a civil servant on duty, public drunkenness and disturbance of public order. In February he announced he would not run for re-election in the upcoming April elections to be held during the national congress. His announcement came in a long press interview in which he said the UGET council had agreed to continue pressing for permission to hold its national congress. His interview was followed the next day by an interview with Secretary General of the local Tunis UGET branch challenging Zaatour and the national level council's decision to hold a congress. He claimed the timing was not right and accused the council of not representing the interests of the whole union.

¶7. (C) Zaatour said among the UGET's main goals are advocating for better lodging for students, better training for teachers, improvements to university campuses which have

not expanded with the growing student population, and more of a student voice in university policies. He also questioned the government's management of funding announced by the European Union for a university project which he claimed had never been implemented.

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Comment  
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18. (C) The UGET is another historical civil society organization, like Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) and the national union (UGTT), that started during the struggle for independence. It therefore enjoys an independent voice and standing within Tunisian society albeit diluted by years of internal divisions and political party interference. The GOT appears determined to replace this organization with an RCD-controlled student union and is using the same tactics it has used against LTDH (Ref A). The student hunger strike has helped attract public attention to the pressure being applied to the UGET and garnered declarations of support from opposition parties and other civil society organizations. So far the students' situation has not caused enough of a public outcry to make the Ministry of Higher Education retract its decision to ignore their demands. However, the fact that the Ministry finally agreed to allow the union to hold its national congress could indicate that the GOT would like to find a way to end this particular face-off with the UGET. The use of Facebook by supporters of the students to organize a campaign on their behalf is another indication of the growing significance of the internet (and Facebook in particular) for opponents of the GOT.  
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